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ABSTRACT

The use of discussion about students' vacations on the first day of a third-year college level conversational German class is analyzed. The discussion imitates a common conversational situation. Many students at this level tend to fall into use of the present tense, attempting few other tenses at first, and research shows that Germans consider correct verb form and placement very important in main clauses. The technique used here to elicit and practice the present and present perfect tenses in a conversational situation is to ask questions concerning present or future time requiring an answer in the present tense, and concerning past time and requiring an answer in the present perfect tense. Students are required to reduce their complex ideas to simple forms and gain early fluency at this level. Examples are given of the use of this method in guided conversations in the classroom, and it is suggested that students both enjoy and profit from this group practice. (MSE)

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Focus on the Verb:

Practical Suggestions for a German Conversation Class

On the first day of my German conversation class, which is a class for students who have completed two years of college German or the equivalent, I ask the students, after they have introduced themselves, to tell the class what they did during their vacation. My goal in the course is to improve the students' listening comprehension and ability to communicate in everyday situations. We practice how to shop in a German speaking environment, how to use public transportation, how to order food in restaurants, but above all we practice to tell others about ourselves, what we want to do, what we did, and how to ask others about themselves. Although we also talk about current events or problems and issues during the course of the semester, I am much more concerned with language for everyday situations and with conversational flow than with the discussion of topics and the transmission of insights. Therefore the question about the students' vacation is not simply a way to fill out the first class meeting, but it is an imitation of a commonplace conversational situation, in which we are either asked about something we did or experienced (Wie waren denn die Ferien?) or talk without having been asked, because we think we should say something or simply want to talk about ourselves. The reverse of this is asking others about themselves, either because we are interested or because we think politeness demands it or simply to keep the conversation flowing.

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When my students then begin to tell the class about their vacation, I am hoping most of all to hear sentences in the present perfect tense (with simple past for the modals and haben and sein), spoken with a certain fluency. But often students have difficulty producing even simple sentences in the conversational past, such as

Ich bin nach Chicago gefahren.
Ich habe viel gearbeitet.
Ich habe meine Schwester besucht.
Ich habe viel geschlafen und gegessen.

Even many of those students who can already speak quite fluently often start out in the present perfect tense but then fall into the present tense.

This made me realize that most students in a conversation class are in need or can profit from special practice of verb forms and the conversational tenses. The verb can be regarded as the heart of the sentence, in German even more so, since the verb with its fixed position functions as a kind of anchor for the entire sentence. It is therefore logical that errors in the form and position of the verb are considered to be relatively serious. This is supported by Robert Politzer's study "Errors of English Speakers of German as Perceived and Evaluated by German Natives,"[1] in which German Gymnasium students evaluated the seriousness of errors commonly made by Americans when speaking German. Of the six error categories that Politzer tested, vocabulary, verb morphology, word order, gender, phonology, and case endings, vocabulary errors were clearly judged to be the most serious. They were considered more serious than the other types of errors in 77% of the sentences given. The percentages for the other error types

were much lower. But of special interest here is that the error category ranked second in seriousness was that of errors in verb morphology. They were considered more serious than other errors in 55% of the sentences. The types of verb errors contained were: incorrect past participles (abgeschneidet, instead of abgeschnitten), incorrect simple past forms, incorrect present tense forms. Following closely were errors in word order, which were judged more serious than other types of errors in 54% of the sentences. It is noteworthy here that all the word order errors tested by Politzer were errors in verb placement. His test sentences containing errors in word order fell into two categories: 1) Sentences of the type "Morgen ich werde ihnen sicher schreiben," that is, main clauses in which the verb should but does not appear in second position, with the subject following, and 2) Incorrect verb placement in dependent clauses, for example,"Ich glaube, daß er ist jetzt nicht hier." Politzer discovered that his test subjects considered the incorrect verb placement in the main clause more serious than the incorrect verb placement in the dependent clause.

As far as the other error categories studied by Politzer are concerned, errors in gender were considered more serious than other errors in 51% of the sentences, phonology errors in only 36% and errors in case endings in 28% of the sentences given. Thus, of the error categories studied by Politzer, errors in verb form and placement are seen as the most serious, if we leave vocabulary errors aside. His German test subjects considered the correct verb form and verb placement in main clauses especially important.

How can we now use this insight into the importance of the verb to teach our students to produce more correct sentences with greater fluency? Let us put ourselves in the shoes of the student for a minute. The mental process necessary to transform our experiences and thoughts in English into a German utterance is a formidable one. First we have to determine the message to be conveyed, then we have to choose the correct words and expressions and have to use them with the correct inflection and in the right order. Lack of vocabulary can, of course, be the most serious stumbling block here. Let us assume, however, that the student knows the appropriate German words and already has a basic knowledge of word order and morphology. What he or she now needs is practice to gain greater ease and fluency. This practice can be provided by letting the student hear and produce many sentences of a similar nature, specifically, for conversation in German, main clauses in the present and present perfect tense. This will, we hope, establish the pattern in the student's mind which will enable him to make the transformation from thought in English to utterance in German ever more quickly. I am convinced that the learning process is a much more thorough one with longer lasting results if the student does not simply respond to a drill situation but to a stimulus of a conversational nature, to a situation where he or she is encouraged to tell something he or she wants to tell, not something the teacher or a book instructed the student to tell.

Such a conversational learning situation can be created easily by

asking two types of simple questions:

1) A question concerning present or future time and requiring an answer in the present tense, for example, "Was machen Sie nach der Klasse?" and
2) A question concerning past time and requiring an answer in the present perfect tense, for example, "Was haben Sie am Wochenende gemacht?"

It has been my experience that one cannot ask the second type of question, requiring an answer in the present perfect tense, often enough. To lead the students onto the right track and help them to avoid using the wrong tense right from the beginning, it is a good idea for the teacher to start by telling what he or she did on the weekend, for example:

Ich habe viel geschlafen.
Ich bin ins Kino gegangen.
Ich habe die Zeitung gelesen.
Ich habe meine Tante besucht, und
ich habe im Garten gearbeitet.

Our students usually do not like to speak in such simple sentences, but rather also want to tell us when and where and with whom and how they did something. The teacher's example can help them to reduce their message to the absolute essentials, allowing them to concentrate on verb form and placement, especially since all the sentences start with ich. By encouraging our students to produce such sentences, we will get them to focus automatically on the two prong verb which they can use almost as a mental rack on which to hang the other elements in the sentence. This will provide them with a mental aid which will speed up the transformation process from English thought to German utterance.

Practice of this kind will also make clear to the student that , for

the most part, only the present and the present perfect tense are necessary for a conversation in German, which even third year college students may not realize. Becoming aware of this will provide the student with another mental tool that will help him or her to achieve greater fluency.

Of course, I am oversimplifying the tense picture here. Students need to be told that the modal auxiliaries and the verbs haben and sein usually appear in the simple past tense. I do not feel that it is difficult for the students to incorporate these exceptions into their mental dual tense model of present tense on the one hand and present perfect tense on the other.

Before describing in greater detail what I do in the classroom, I would like to mention a difficult aspect of language teaching: error correction. We do not want to discourage our students, we do not want to interrupt when there is a good flow in the conversation in the classroom, yet our students cannot improve unless we correct at least some of their errors. A focus on the verb can help us here. James Hendrickson states that correcting the following errors can be quite useful:

1) Errors that impair communication significantly.
2) Errors that have a highly stigmatizing effect on the listener and reader.
3) Errors that occur frequently.[2]

While letting the first two points stand as they are, I use the following guideline in my conversation class when we practice speaking as I have described: I correct almost all errors in verb morphology and placement and also those errors that can be corrected easily, among them, for example, incorrect prepositions in place expressions, such as nach Hause, zu Hause,

ins Kino, in die Stadt, etc.

Let me now continue to describe how I actually proceed in my conversation class. I mentioned that on the first day of class I ask my students about their vacation. Their answers reveal a lot about their speaking ability and allow me to get a first impression of each student's strengths and weaknesses. I then continue this type of chitchat, so to speak, during the next class meetings and practice the verb forms absolutely necessary for conversation in German by asking questions whose answers require the use of these verb forms. For instance, to start out with the present tense for the most basic review, I ask the students questions like, "Was machen Sie heute nach der Klasse? heute abend? morgen? am Montag? am Wochenende?" or "Was haben Sie heute vor?" For variation, I may encourage the students to ask one another or me. To practice the modal auxiliaries, I ask questions such as, "Müssen Sie heute nach der Klasse etwas tun? Was müssen Sie heute noch alles tun? Was wollen Sie heute abend machen? Können Sie heute abend ausgehen? Was dürfen Sie heute nicht tun?" It is a challenge for the teacher to practice all the modals while maintaining a conversation-like exchange and trying to avoid giving instructions like: please use dürfen in the next sentence.

After having practiced the present tense in this way, I ask the students about something they did in the past, using the present perfect tense, "Was haben Sie gestern abend gemacht? letztes Wochenende?" or, to practice the modals, "Mußten Sie gestern abend etwas tun? Konnten Sie gestern abend den Film sehen?" etc. Initially, I discourage the use of dependent clauses starting with temporal conjunctions, such as als and

nachdem, because these clauses require the use of a tense other than the present perfect tense. Instead, I encourage the students to use time adverbs like zuerst, dann, danach, zum Schluß, zuletzt in main clauses to express a sequence. I try to interject expressions of interest and surprise as a true conversational partner might do, for example, if a student says, "Ich bin am Samstag zu einer Party gegangen," I might say, "Zu einer Party, mm." or something else that might be appropriate in that situation or with that student.

After having practiced the conversational tenses in this way at the beginning of the semester, we then start using our book for the course, Philip Grundlehner's Sprich Deutsch. On occasion I also use Skala magazines or similar material. But we also continue our chitchat, the asking of "Was machst du heute abend?" or "Wie war das Wochenende?" whenever there is time. And, in addition to this conversational practice, I use verbs from the chapters of Sprich Deutsch for a kind of guided conversation, usually in the present perfect tense, because this is what students need to practice the most. This again directs the students' focus to the verb. For instance, after we have studied the chapter on hotels, I might write the following verb phrases from or related to the chapter on the board:

nach dem Weg fragen
das Hotel finden
hineingehen
sich anmelden
ein Anmeldeformular ausfüllen
einen Schlüssel bekommen
sich über etwas beklagen

I ask the students to use these verb phrases to make up a brief account

of an imaginary experience, in this case, for instance, looking for a certain hotel in Munich. I then start the guided conversation by asking, "Also was haben Sie denn in München gemacht, um das Hotel zu finden?" The student might answer, "Ich habe einen Polizisten nach dem Weg gefragt. Er hat mir gesagt, wo das Hotel war, und ich habe das Hotel bald gefunden. Ich bin hineingegangen und habe mich angemeldet. Ich mußte ein Anmeldeformular ausfüllen. Dann habe ich meinen Schlüssel bekommen und bin auf mein Zimmer gegangen." I might say, "War das Zimmer in Ordnung?" The student might answer. "Nein, die Dusche war kaputt. Ich habe mich darüber beklagt, und sie haben die Dusche repariert."

Of course this is too smooth and correct and is certainly an idealized example of what most students might produce. I have found, however, that many students enjoy this kind of guided conversation and do quite well and the poorer ones show definite improvement after they have done something like this a few times and have been able to listen to what their classmates have said. Describing a whole sequence in the present perfect tense, with simple past for the modals and haben and sein.is excellent practice for our students, especially when done repeatedly throughout a semester. The students get a feeling for the conversational tenses in German, gain confidence, and will be able to talk about everyday experiences with much greater fluency and ease.

Notes

[1] Robert L. Politzer, "Errors of English Speakers of German as Perceived and Evaluated by German Natives," Modern Language Journal, 62 (1978), 253-61.

[2] James M. Hendrickson, "Error Correction in Foreign Language Teaching: Recent Theory, Research, and Practice," Modern Language Journal, 62 (1978), 392.